
CHAPTER IX

Conclusion

The *Exxon Valdez* spill was the first time that the Coast Guard had ever worked with the Army or the Corps in large-scale oil recovery operations. DOD and Corps officials at times became impatient waiting for political decisions when they saw a job that needed to be done. They were uncomfortable in the “support” role, especially when the command structure was unclear. The military prefers to be given a mission and complete authority to carry out that mission. In the Alaska operations, the National Contingency Plan forced the Coast Guard to deal with a large cast of players using consensus and cooperation, but military organizations do not normally function this way. Colonel Kakel compared the operation to a mass casualty exercise in which hard decisions have to be made about who lives and dies (or in this case, hard decisions about resources and priorities). The Coast Guard, Exxon, Defense Department, and Corps all performed triage.¹ With so many agents involved in the decision-making process, however, Corps personnel at times found the mission and the command structure to be muddled.

In the first weeks after the grounding, as the oil spread, Assistant Secretary Page, General Kelly, and other officials in headquarters became increasingly frustrated by the inactivity and the failure of Exxon and the Coast Guard to request resources. These officials aggressively sought ways for the Corps to contribute to the cleanup. They were confident of the Corps’ capabilities and eager to respond to President Bush’s call for action. If they had not been so aggressive about committing resources, the dredges would not have recovered as much oil as they did and their capabilities would not have become known. The proactive approach, however, sometimes created confusion and tension with Exxon and the Coast Guard and within the Corps of Engineers itself, and it placed added strain on field personnel.

In addition, there was an element of risk in pushing for missions before the Corps was fully prepared.

Because of the urgency of the situation in Alaska, at DOD's request, Corps officials sent the dredges before the issues of command and control, funding, and authority could be resolved. In the future decision makers must clarify the authority and funding issues beforehand to avoid the confusion and the reimbursement problems that the Corps experienced. Before committing resources and personnel, they must define the command structure and mission as much as possible so that personnel in the headquarters and the field know exactly what is expected of them. The Alaska experience revealed a need to construct new response relationships, command and control channels, and communications channels, but this should not be done during the tension and frenzy of an actual response. The Corps not only needs to establish agreements with other agencies but also needs to develop its own standard operating procedures for how orders are given, how to mobilize, and how to equip the dredges.

General Hatch observed that the Corps can make its greatest contribution as part of a federal response team, providing its dredges, skimmers, contracting capabilities, and other resources. There should be comprehensive plans to respond that put all appropriate talent from federal agencies and the private sector under the control of one responsible party. Any proposed Corps standard operating procedures, he added, should be subordinated to the overall operational control of some other agency. The Corps task, he concluded, was "to press within the bounds of propriety for the preparation of regional response plans, to be a very proactive supporter of those plans, and to be prepared to execute any role that we might have emerging therefrom."²

Despite some confusion, the Corps responded well. Colonel Kakel and his staff handled a steady stream of visitors and provided valuable support to other Districts, North Pacific Division, Corps laboratories, headquarters, and the dredges. General Stevens praised Colonel Kakel and his staff for their diplomatic approach and for demonstrating a "team effort" unmatched by other agencies. General Smith observed that Kakel and his staff played an important role in helping the Defense Department "make wise support decisions." Perhaps

John Elmore expressed the sentiment best when he explained that occasionally a single District or Division gets the opportunity to “carry the flag” for the Corps of Engineers, and in this instance Alaska District carried the flag well.³

The dredge crews have been called the “heroes” of the Corps’ oil spill operations. They went to Alaska without understanding what they were to do and with no experience in an oil recovery mission and within days became key players. Their initiative and innovation led to the recovery of significant amounts of oil. “Inside of a week,” Colonel Wilson concluded, “they were probably one of the most effective assets we had out there for really bringing in large amounts of free floating oil.” General McInerney observed that the *Yaquina* crew “acquitted themselves admirably and were superb representatives of DOD.” “The *Yaquina*,” he added, “quickly became a valued asset in the oil spill cleanup and earned the respect and admiration of the Federal On-Scene Coordinator and Exxon officials.”⁴

Hatch and Page also praised the dredge masters and crews for their innovativeness and dedication. “It is this caliber of extraordinary performance in the face of unknown and severe conditions,” Page wrote, “that contributes to the Corps’ outstanding reputation.” Dredge captain Miguel Jimenez aptly asserted that the dredges set a new standard for the oil recovery industry. “The dredge has proven its capability to be used in an oil spill scenario,” he wrote. “Given proper air support, at least one sea skimming boom with craft for towing and being deployed at the earliest possible time, the dredges are without equal.”⁵

The Alaska experience provided ample evidence that the Army and the Corps can make substantial contributions in future oil spills and that the Corps should be involved in response planning. The number of major oil spills that have occurred since the *Exxon Valdez* is appallingly large (see Appendix I), and inevitably there will be more in the future. Perhaps a greater tragedy than the Alaska spill itself would be for the Corps and other agencies to fail to use their experience to develop more effective procedures and relationships and better response capabilities.